DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 829 CS 211 690

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TITLE Institutional Politics: The Rhetoric of the Upward Bound (Interacting Successfully in Corporate Culture).
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *Communication Skills; Employer Employee Relationship; Higher Education; *Informal Organization; Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior; Communication Channels; *Corporate Culture; Professional Guidelines

ABSTRACT

Protocol involves the behavior and procedures that are proper in any discourse community, including both what is spoken or written as well as what is not spoken or written. Students need to understand what proper protocol in corporate culture involves, how it is determined by formal and informal structures, and why such protocol is important. They also need to be aware of the intricacies of official and unofficial discourse. Furthermore, if technical communication students know how complicated the informal structures and procedures of organizations can be regarding human relationships, they can proceed cautiously and fit more easily into the informal structure. As new employees, students can learn about the informal workings of the organization by observing and listening and by participating in informal conversations about topics that are related and unrelated to work. Students should therefore know about small group dynamics, nonverbal communication, and listening techniques. Protocol also involves matters of verbal communication, including formal channels of communication. Students should be aware of these channels, and should also determine the informal channels of communication that develop in the work setting. Proper protocol becomes the rhetoric of the upward bound--the rhetoric of those students who will advance in their profession. (MM)

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INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS: THE RHETORIC OF THE UPWARD BOUND
Interacting Successfully in Corporate Culture]

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Most students realize that they must be prepared academically to succeed once they enter the corporate environment, but many are not aware that they must also be prepared to interact correctly. To assume their roles in corporate culture, to survive institutional politics, technical communication students must understand the spoken and unspoken discourse of industrial protocol. Behavior and procedures that are proper in industry, business, and government differ from what is proper in the academic world, especially from the guidelines appropriate for students as they interact with teachers and other students.

Students need to understand what proper protocol in corporate culture involves, how it is determined by formal and informal structures, and why such protocol is important. Moreover, they need to be aware of the intricacies of official and unofficial discourse. Students can successfully assume their roles in corporate culture if they are knowledgeable about the correct protocol for verbal communication as well as for dress and time. They also need to know how to handle the matter of sexism should problems arise.

Although some of the information I present may seem simply "common sense" too obvious to be covered in the classroom, I have

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found that many students, especially undergraduates, lack this knowledge. (Unfortunately, a few teachers, though they are aware of proper protocol, do not view it as important.)

Protocol

Protocol involves the behavior and procedures that are proper in any discourse community, including both what is spoken or written as well as what is not spoken or written. Protocol in the corporate world refers to the procedures followed by the employees in a company, particularly procedures governing human relationships. Protocol provides guidelines for what is proper behavior when employees work alone and when they interact with each other concerning company business. For example, protocol designates the proper way for employees to communicate in writing and orally. It also shapes what is considered proper dress and what are proper attitudes about and uses of time.

Note that protocol can be treacherous because in most organizations both official protocol and unofficial protocol exist. The "in" people -- the seasoned, successful employees -- are the people who follow the rules of proper etiquette specified by both types of protocol. The unofficial protocol often serves as a means of excluding those not aware of the rules or those not willing to follow them. Protocol therefore can be a means by which employees obtain power and keep it.

Most organizations in business, industry, and government have a formal structure that delineates both (1) the lines of responsibility and authority and (2) the channels through which

communications are transmitted. This formal structure consists of upper management that directs middle management which, in turn, supervises employees in the units or departments composing the organization.

Most organizations have in common certain essential features. Normally, the organizational structure sets up formal divisions of labor, authority, and responsibility. Because some types of labor carry more prestige and status than do others, there is a hierarchical structure. Thus, formal positions in the organization carry with them certain authorities and responsibilities as well as certain levels of prestige, status, and importance.

Often organizations state formally in writing the responsibilities and duties as well as the authority of the person in each position in the organization, often indicating in some way the status of the position. Employees know what is expected of them and what they can expect. These formal expectations for each position exist no matter who holds that position at a given time.

Some companies have employee handbooks that contain this information about their policies and procedures -- official statements concerning protocol. Students furthermore can make certain assumptions about the authority and status of a member of the organization according to the position held by that person. Sometimes they can also determine the status and prestige of an employee by what size an employee's office is and how it is

furnished, whether the employee has a secretary, and what the employee wears.

Besides having a formal structure, an organization will have an informal structure -- one that constantly changes and that is usually quite complicated. Most of the time the informal structure of an organization differs from the formal structure. How much difference there is varies from organization to organization. Generally, the closer the informal structure follows the formal structure, the happier employees are and the more harmoniously they work together.

Protocol, especially the official protocol resulting from the formal structure of an organization, helps it operate smoothly and efficiently. As discussed above, protocol can also be a way employees obtain and keep power.

Technical communication students may view some protocol, such as that indicating status, as silly. Nonetheless, indications of status are important to persons in the corporate world because, especially in a large organization, they provide clues to the appropriate behavior for situations in which the participants may be strangers. Members of an organization expect to be treated in certain ways depending upon their positions. They do not want to be treated as if they have more status or authority than they do, and they especially do not want to be treated as if they have less.

Students must remember that being knowledgeable about protocol means being aware of both official and unofficial rules

that stem from the formal and informal structures of organizations and from the persons working within those structures. Furthermore, if technical communication students know how complicated the informal structures and procedures of organizations can be regarding human relationships, they can proceed cautiously and fit more easily into the informal structure than if they are not aware of the complications that can arise if they violate informal protocol.

As mentioned earlier, some companies have employee handbooks that contain information about their policies and procedures -- formal guidelines concerning matters such as how long to take for breaks and lunch, and which absences are excused and which are not. When they begin working, students should obtain copies of these handbooks and read them carefully. Nonetheless, even if a company has formal guidelines, informal guidelines may have evolved. For example, officially employees are to eat lunch between 12 and 1, but unofficially it is acceptable for them to eat between 11:30 and 12:30 or 12:30 and 1:30 if they inform the receptionist.

Once students begin working, they are faced with the difficult task of learning the appropriate informal protocol according to the informal structures and human relationships that exist in the organization. They should first try to determine the formal structure of the organization that they are working for, so that they can make certain tentative assumptions about the duties, responsibilities, and authority that persons have according to

the positions those persons hold. Technical communication students can then look for indications of status and consider whether those indications are consistent with what the formal structure of the company has led them to expect. They should determine, as best they can, the practical realities and politics characterizing the company where they are employed. For example, they will have to learn who are the most competent employees and who are the influential ones. They must also learn which employees like each other and which do not, as well as which employees have worked together harmoniously and which have had open conflicts.

As new employees, students can learn about the informal workings of the organization by observing and listening and by participating in informal conversations about topics that are related and unrelated to work. It is important, though, that students be warned not to talk too much, to do mostly observing and listening when they first begin working. They need to realize that it takes time for anyone to acquire a true picture of the informal human relationships existing in an organization and of the resulting informal procedures. Because they are not veterans of the corporate world, students can easily be misled by surface appearances. Teachers should stress how complicated the informal structure of an organization can be, partially because it is always changing, and how difficult it is to obtain an accurate picture of it even after analyzing it for a period of time.

Students will be able to work more easily within the informal structures of an organization if they know about small group dynamics, nonverbal communication, and listening techniques. Teachers should advise students to read as much as they can about these subjects and to take courses, if possible, in which these subjects are covered.

When they begin working, students must not try to push their way into the informal structure of an organization; they must allow time for relationships to develop. At first, other employees may be hesitant to reveal important information about the informal workings of the organization to a new employee. Quite commonly, old employees simply leave new employees alone, allowing them to break unofficial rules and norms. Students have to earn their right to be a part of the informal structure of the organization they are working for.

As previously mentioned, protocol involves the matters of dress, time, and sexism as well as verbal communication. In this presentation, I will briefly discuss the last area -- protocol and verbal communication.

Protocol and Verbal Communication

For each position in an organization, there are certain lines of communication -- channels for transmitting official matters. Members of the organization are expected to go "through the proper channels" according to their formal position. The formal structure, thus, designates for employees the persons, in positions both above and below them, that they are supposed to

communicate with.

Because communication is expected to travel through formal channels, an organization may specify what types of information are to be sent, when they are to be sent, and what form they are to take. Employees are expected to conform to the guidelines specified. For example, subordinates may be required to submit monthly progress reports on a standardized form to their department supervisor. The supervisor, in turn, may be required to conduct departmental meetings every three months. In those meetings, the supervisor may then summarize the progress of department members and the department as a whole, report any relevant information received from upper management, and answer informally questions that members have.

Because, as new employees, students are usually in subordinate positions, most of their communications are messages from persons in positions above them -- messages conveying information about their job and in which their job performance is evaluated. Students should not look for hidden meanings and implications. They should remind themselves of the tendency of subordinates, particularly those new in a job, to read into communications meaning that their supervisors do not intend. However, if they are concerned about a communication that is an important one, they should talk with their supervisor about it.

In addition to receiving communications from supervisors, on occasion, they may send messages to others doing the same job that they are; these communications will normally focus on

efforts to coordinate work and to solve task-related problems.

When they communicate with others, students should consider the organizational structure of the company for which they are working, so that they can do so correctly. They should direct their oral and written communications through the proper channels. Most employees are assigned immediate supervisors who can provide advice and who will usually be the person with whom they should communicate.

At first, students may find the process of working through channels frustrating. They may not understand the necessity for such red tape. All they may see is that decisions often take time and subsequent action is slow. They should not give in to the urge to take matters into their own hands and go outside the formal lines of communication. Those at lower levels in an organization do not always have the complete picture of a situation. A lot of information is lost as it passes from the top to the bottom of an organization; as information passes downward through formal channels, it is filtered out, distorted, misinterpreted, or ignored. Often information going from lower-level to upper-level members of an organization does not fare much better. Students cannot eliminate such problems; they must work within the system.

Even when using the correct formal channels for communicating, students as new employees should exercise caution about what they communicate formally, particularly with what they put in writing; they may not have all the facts concerning an issue.

They especially may not be privy to information that is part of the informal workings of the organization. Although those in the corporate world communicate primarily to complete work-related tasks, these communications are affected by the personal relationships existing.

By listening and observing, technical communication students can determine the informal channels of communication that have developed where they are working. For example, although certain persons may be formally designated as assistants to others in administrative positions, those assistants can be extremely influential in establishing lines of communication. Because such persons decide the flow of messages through formal channels, they can impede or facilitate communication. Sometimes, it may be more advantageous to be on good terms with a person's assistant than with the person, even though that person holds a formal position of authority. While not everyone may be in a position to control the flow of communication through formal channels, almost anyone can influence communication passing through the informal networks. Furthermore, those who are adept at influencing informal communication can gain importance and power within an organization.

New employees have to learn to deal with information that spreads informally from person-to-person through an organization. The grapevine can be an important source of information that employees cannot get through formal channels. In addition, it sometimes becomes more active when communications through formal

channels do not provide the information that employees want or need: how active it becomes depends upon how badly employees want the information and how much factual information is available.

Although most researchers agree that information spreads quickly through the grapevine and that this method is often used, they are divided as to whether the information is conveyed accurately. Contributing greatly to the degree of accuracy, of course, are the persons who compose the grapevine. In addition, factual information is usually transmitted more accurately than is emotional or highly personal information. Moreover, when information, particularly rumors, spreads via the grapevine, three processes normally occur. Some details are lost (information is generalized), some details are emphasized or other details added (information originally important loses its importance), and details are colored by the biases and prejudices of those who are a part of the grapevine. Therefore, grapevine information can easily cause misunderstandings.

As new employees, students in technical communication should pay attention to grapevine information, but, because both facts and rumors are transmitted through the grapevine, they should be very careful about contributing information or acting as a result of information that they hear through informal sources.

Note that in this presentation I have not discussed aspects of adjusting to corporate culture in terms of the writing that students complete as new employees. Their academic experiences

may have prepared them to write various types of documents; however, once they begin working, they must learn how to write according to the context for the specific document as well as the standards and guidelines of their specific employer.

Summary

When learning to follow proper protocol, technical communication students should be guided in all that they do by the idea that they are professionals. If they complete an internship, during that time they are professionals representing their school and the program in which they are studying. Later as new employees, they are professionals representing their employers -- a role that the corporate world emphasizes more and takes more seriously than does the academic world. They must realize that many will view them not as Carole Smythe or Doug Porter, but as Ranson Computer Corporation.

It is true that they must be competent in their field; however, in matters of protocol and human relations, what they do and how they do it take on added importance when they are working as interns and later when they are new and then seasoned employees. Being a professional means knowing the proper protocol for the corporate world -- a world that is usually more conservative than the academic one.

Learning about proper protocol enables students as new employees to be able to survive institutional politics. Proper protocol becomes the rhetoric of the upward bound -- the rhetoric of those students who will advance in their profession.

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